

## Supporting Our Troops?

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On the side of their house in Davis, California, one family is expressing their witness to the costs of the Iraq conflict. On their exterior wall, one devoid of windows or doors that faces a public green space, they have placed a mark for each casualty of the war. One section is devoted to the members of various coalition forces who've lost their lives. A much larger portion of the wall holds marks for Iraqi civilians who've died since we invaded their country.

A few weeks ago, I stood on the sidewalk beside this "memorial wall" and experienced the impact of seeing those 80,000 plus marks, reading the small hand-printed sign that tells passersby what the wall represents. A number is a statistic, but each mark really represents a tragedy, a hole in the fabric of humanity that can never be repaired. Each mark acknowledges a human being, with dreams and hopes, flaws and family. Each mark is a person who died.

The wall is almost full, and they acknowledge that it's been hard to keep up with the number of people who are dying in this conflict. Some estimates of civilian deaths are close to 1 million people. They don't have that much room on their wall. What happens next, I wonder? What happens next?

Today is Veteran's Day – the day we honor those who have served in the armed forces. It's not the same as Memorial Day, when we remember people who have died, but even on this day, we do tend to focus on those who made the ultimate sacrifice. This holiday initially started as Armistice Day, established at the end of World War 1, to remind Americans of the "war to end all wars." Unfortunately, we know how that turned out – it wasn't the last war to call our young men and women away from their families; it wasn't the last time our country engaged in conflict in the world.

Like many of you, I dream of a world at peace, where people live together in harmony without the need of violence and destruction to address conflicts and concerns. I yearn for a day when all of the slogans I remember from the anti-Vietnam war effort come true – that schools are fully funded and the military holds bake sales to pay for bombs; that we have truly learned to make love, not war.

Then, the more pragmatic part of me reviews the arc of human history, with ongoing cycles of war and conflict. Reading the news reminds me of our ever-escalating ability to kill each other in more intricate means. This part of me also acknowledges those times when confrontation and force become the last resort in dealing with oppression, those times when we have found ourselves at a crossroads and took up arms in self-defense or to protect the innocent from annihilation.

In the tradition of just wars, I understand that there have been times when war was justifiable as a response to an emergency, as a move in self-defense. Given the conditions of the world, this pragmatic part of me doubts I will see an end to war in my lifetime.

Nations fund a military presence to defend themselves in a pragmatic world, where there is a need to be prepared for the unthinkable. With that said, we hope our leaders share a desire for the ideal world of peace, and that they sincerely work for amity and justice through non-violent means. We pray that they learn to respectfully talk to one

another, to resolve conflicts before they escalate and through non-violent means. To that end, we take the opportunity to let them know about our hopes and desires, reminding them of the fundamental values upon which our nation was begun, and encouraging them to find peaceful means to intervene in and resolve the world's problems.

Despite how we feel about this war, specifically, I think we have an obligation to respect and honor those who have engaged in military service. This nation's military forces have served in times of war and in times of national need. Even during those times when war was not easily justified or popularly supported, men and women have responded to the nation's call and stepped forward to do what they were asked to do.

For that, they deserve our support for doing what is being done in our name, for facing the challenge and doing the best that they can, despite less than ideal conditions. Despite how we might feel about war, those who respond deserve our recognition, especially on Veteran's Day.

However, just as soldiers don't have the option to serve only one day, I don't think we have the option to remember them and speak laudibly of their sacrifice on only a single day, either. I think supporting our troops is an ongoing effort, and it starts long before they are ever deployed to foreign lands or asked to address issues of national concern in the homeland. To me, supporting our troops is more than a handy catchphrase, slapped on the back of someone's car in a cute ribbon shape.

If we are truly to support our troops, what would we do? Send care packages at Christmas? Make sure we have a flag decal on our front door? Participate in "Red Fridays" – a recently distributed mass email suggestion urging everyone to wear the color red on Fridays as a show of support for our soldiering men and women?

One of the best ways we can support our troops is to insure that they are not sent to fight in an unjust war in the first place. It becomes our responsibility to speak up and do what we can to create better conditions in the world. Of all of the strategies available to us for improving the condition of the world, war is one of the least effective and most destructive. Involvement in war damages the soul of a nation, making it easier to consider violence as an option the next time, and the time after that.

Supporting our troops does not mean supporting flawed policies and misguided leaders who lie, deceive, or manipulate to achieve nefarious objectives. Our role in responsible citizenship is to hold ourselves and our leaders accountable for the actions they take, to demand justice, and to encourage a return to the rule of law and rational leadership, especially in our own nation. Just because we can fight doesn't mean that we should fight.

Our use of force, our deployment of troops in war, should always be the course of last resort. I know I'm preaching to the choir here – I know my comments today will not be considered particularly controversial in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. But even the choir needs to be preached to, now and then! We need to remind each other of what we can do and what we must do, as people of faith. We need to spark hope and renewed commitment to action within our own community, because war takes a toll on those on the homefront, too. The fight for justice is a long one, just as the fight on the field of battle is long.

There are prices to be paid for sending people to fight. Death is forever. Those who come back from the field of battle suffer, as well, along with their families and loved ones. Our role for them is one of being a fair witness to these impacts, and demanding

that returning service members receive the support, counseling, medical assistance, and treatment that they need to return to life as whole as they possibly can.

For the benefit of this nation, we need to keep our promises to these men and women, and help them reestablish their lives after fighting a battle they didn't start in a war that they didn't choose. Welcome them home as heroes. Then, make sure that the next day and the day after that there are support systems in place for them and for their families that help them to cope, heal, renew, and refocus their lives.

As we prepare for the next part of our worship this morning, I'd like to recognize those in this community who have seen military service. I want to acknowledge that it can be hard to talk about one's experience of war or military service when you return to civilian life. It can be hard when you are a military family to feel that you are understood and supported in your community.

It can be challenging to be a part of a liberal religious community and identify yourself as ex-military. And yet, many of us are veterans or related to veterans, I'm sure.

- First, I'd like to ask those who served in the military to stand.
- Next, I'd like to ask those people who participated in support roles to stand – doctors, nurses, counselors, or others who worked in military-related fields.
- Now, I'd like to invite those who were conscientious objectors, or were among those who counseled or assisted conscientious objectors to stand.
- Would you please stand if you were ever a civilian impacted by war in a place where you lived?
- And, lastly, would those of you who are family members or friends of men and women who have served in the military please rise?

As you can see, many of us have been impacted by the military and even more of by the effects of war. Thank you for your service to this nation and to all of us.

You may be seated.

**Ritual:**

Today we'll be creating a visual reminder of those who have been impacted by war. In your order of service today, you had a cream-colored ribbon. I'd like you to take that ribbon in your hand now, and hold it for a few minutes. As you hold this ribbon, think of someone who has been impacted by war –

- it could be YOU – for your military service or being in a war-torn area at some point in your life,
  - it could be someone you know – who was or is in the military or who lived during a time of war,
  - perhaps it is someone you've never met, but who is currently serving in the military in Afghanistan, or Iraq, or any of the hundreds of posts our armed services maintain. Perhaps your mind holds the image of a man, or woman, or child who is living in fear as war, conflict, civil strife, or violence swirls around them,
  - it could be someone who stood up to be counted as an anti-war activist or conscientious objector. Perhaps it is someone who took action to speak the truth of war to power in an effort to stop a war or armed conflict. Think of this person now, as you hold this ribbon.
- MOMENT OF SILENCE

These people who are in our minds deserve our honor today – on Veteran's Day – because in their way, in their time, they faced one of life's most difficult situations and

did what they had to do to fulfill their responsibilities, to address the issues at hand, to survive in unthinkable circumstances, to be true to their values, and to try to make the world a better place.

Today, we will honor them by tying these ribbons on the bamboo poles that are here at the front of the sanctuary. We will create a visual reminder of those who we hold in our thoughts and hearts, known or unknown, but all a part of our interconnected web of life and in our thoughts today.

As the music plays, I ask you to rise and come forward to tie your ribbon on one of the bamboo poles. (Aside – we'd planned on taking these ribbons outside to the poles placed in the garden, but the rain changed our plans. I'll make sure that they are placed in the garden on the next clear day.)

If you choose to stay in your seat, please ask your neighbor to tie your ribbon for you.

When you've completed tying your ribbon, you may choose to speak the name of the person you're honoring by coming to the center of the chancel, where I'll have the microphone. When you're done, please return to your seat.

**MUSIC/ ALL PROCESS:**

When all have returned to their seats: I ask you to join me in two minutes of remembrance, for all of the Veterans and others affected by war.

The first minute of silence will be for those who died in war – either in service to their country or as a result of armed conflict. The second minute of silence is for those who came home, and for those who survived, but have lived with the results of war every day of their lives since.

- 2 MINUTES OF SILENCE,